

The Family Council at CAMH(2009)

Health promotion involves strategies that impact the social determinants of health. At the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), the Family Council's work recognizes families and social support networks as important determinants of mental health.

The Family Council is a non-profit corporation funded by CAMH to serve as a voice for clients and families within the organization. One of the Family Council's primary objectives is to provide peer support. The Family Council operates a Family Resource Centre staffed by volunteers who provide emotional support and practical support to clients and families in navigating the mental health system. The Family Council Resource Centre is open four days a week on-site at CAMH to families. Those who might access the Family Council Resource Centre range from clients to any caregiver or person significant to someone that is experiencing mental health problems. According to Family Council Coordinator Susan Allen, "Our definition of family is an inclusive one".

In addition to peer support, another function of the Family Council is to ensure that the voices of clients and families are heard within CAMH through systemic advocacy and involvement in various governances, committees and workgroups. The Family Council is also increasingly becoming a voice on mental health issues beyond CAMH, having recently participated in the provincial government's 10 year mental health and addictions strategy consultation process.

The Family Council is an important part of CAMH's aim to sharpen the focus of its work to address health within a holistic view. This family involvement is crucial since, as Susan Allen notes, "People don't experience mental health problems in isolation". In fact, Allen, identifies one of the organization's strongest successes this year as the adding of "Family Sensitive" to the Mission, Vision, and Goals of CAMH within its Strategic Plan 2009 - 2012. This addition was a result of CAMH's consultation with the Family Council and families through questionnaires and a focus group. In addition, Allen has also noticed the increasing importance of families at CAMH through programming, workshops, and events that are demonstrating family-centred approaches. As the Family Council and CAMH continue to evolve together, engaging clients and families will result in not only more targeted interventions delivered in connection to treatment, but also broader community involvement and systemic change around mental health promotion and care.